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SUBJECT: STIFF COMPETITION FOR GNP SEATS IN BUSAN

¶1. (U) This message is from the American Presence Post (APP) in Busan, Korea.

¶2. (U) With the April 9 general elections less than 60 days away, competition for Grand National Party (GNP) seats is setting new records. Spurred on by Lee Myung-bak's landslide victory in the presidential election in December 2007, GNP hopefuls flocked to the party's registration venue on February 5 to sign up for a chance to join the 299-seat parliament. Although the city of Busan has only 18 seats to offer, it serves as an example of the strong competition within the party that is likely throughout the GNP's stronghold in southeastern part of the Peninsula. If the GNP nominating committee pays any heed to the constituent's voices as expressed in recent polls, a large turnover in the lawmaker ranks is likely as well as a new trend away from older incumbents and lawmakers without business savvy. Despite a vocal feud between factions within the party that threatens to divide supporters, the GNP is likely to win a resounding victory on April 9. END SUMMARY.

GNP'S ROOTS IN THE SOUTHEAST

¶3. (U) When voters go to the polls on April 9 to cast their votes for members of the National Assembly, pundits predict that the Grand National Party (GNP) will capture a majority of the seats. Following the landslide victory of Lee Myung-bak in the December 2007 presidential election, Koreans are getting behind the president-elect and his party in large numbers. The GNP had to extend the registration deadline for the upcoming election due to the unprecedented volume of 1,173 interested persons hoping for one of 243 seats in the parliament. In the Busanjin A District alone, there were an estimated 20 candidates contending for the GNP nomination (although only 12 decided to officially register) to reclaim the seat occupied by Kim Byung-ho who defected from the GNP to support Lee Hoi-chang in the run-up to the December 2007 presidential election.

¶4. (U) Busan and the neighboring Gyeongsang Provinces have long been a base for the GNP and its conservative predecessors. In the 2004 election, GNP candidates swept 60 out of 68 constituencies in the Gyeongsang provinces. Almost half of the GNP lawmakers in the National Assembly (63 out of 130 lawmakers) hail from this southeastern region. In the 2000 and 2004 legislative elections, support for the GNP in this region averaged over 50 percent.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

¶5. (U) Although not a new concept itself, in this election season there are an unusually high number of candidates who are the sons of former lawmakers. In Busan alone, there are four such candidates

who are running for one of the 18 seats. The list includes Park Jae-woo, son of six-term lawmaker and former National Assembly Speaker Park Kwan-yong; Jang Je-won, son of two-term lawmaker and former National Assembly Vice-Speaker Jang Sung-man; Choi Jae-wan, son of six-term lawmaker Choi Hyung-woo; and Kim Se-yeon, son of the late Kim Jin-jae, a five-term lawmaker. Kim Se-yeon's other connection to politics is that he is the son-in-law of the newly appointed Prime Minister Han Seung-soo.

¶16. (U) In a meeting with emboff, Kim Se-yeon explained his motivations for running for office and how the political landscape was changing in the run-up to the April election. Kim said that his father unexpectedly died in 2005, weeks after being diagnosed with cancer. Given the abruptness of his father's death, the younger Kim said that he felt he needed to complete his father's work. Being only 36 years old and the father of three children, including two-month old twins, Kim confided that the timing of the elections was not the best. He said that he had not envisioned becoming a politician but had planned to run the family's industrial belt company, started by his grandfather in 1945. But a sense of duty was more compelling than the other factors.

¶17. (U) Looking at the well-outfitted campaign office and bustling staff, it is clear that Kim is taking the campaign seriously and should be in a good position to nudge out first-term lawmaker Park Seung-hwan. When asked about the plethora of staff and the nice office, Kim said that they were all "inherited" from his father. The building was his father's and most of the staff are volunteers who had worked for his father in years past. Despite the paternal reasons for running for office, Kim also represents a new age of politicians in Korea who come from a business background and are intent on improving Korea's economy. Following Lee Myung-bak's win in the presidential election, many feel the door to a political career is wide open for those with a proven track record in the business world.

A NEW BREED OF POLITICIAN

¶18. (U) Even though the GNP is expected to fare well in Busan and the Gyeongsang Provinces, this is not to say that the incumbents are guaranteed a spot in the 18th National Assembly. A recent poll conducted by Hankyoreh and Research Plus indicated that 40.6 percent of respondents said they wanted lawmakers in their constituencies to change while only 30.3 percent said they would support incumbents. A separate poll conducted by Kookje Daily News showed that only 6.1 percent of Busan residents, 7.4 percent of Ulsan residents and 13.8 percent of South Gyeongsang Province residents felt their lawmakers had done a good job representing their constituencies.

¶19. (U) The committee responsible for screening general election candidates must have been listening to the public sentiment as they rolled out a plan on February 9 that included replacing three and four-term lawmakers, legislators in their 70's and many from the southeastern region. Certain lawmakers who are considered morally suspect may also face replacement. An editorial in the Chosun Ilbo said "It is time to replace the old trees with new ones" and called for a search among younger and more innovative candidates. A preliminary analysis of the 1,173 people who filed an application to participate in the April 9 election showed that the average age of the applicants is 52 years. About 283 applicants, or 24 percent, were businessmen, followed by 130 legal professionals, 91 professors and 33 journalists.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE VETERANS?

¶10. (U) Despite these calls for a younger generation of politicians, a total of twelve three-time lawmakers will run for a seat in Busan (four), Daegu (four), and North Gyeongsang Province (four). At least a third of them are likely to fail to get nominations from the party. One Busan lawmaker stands out among the crowd of veterans. Kim Hyung-oh is a four-time lawmaker who is currently serving as the Deputy Chairman for President-elect Lee Myung-bak's transition committee. Although Kim is occupying a prominent seat in the transition committee, most pundits discount the notion that he would accept a position in Lee's government over his seat in the National Assembly. Dr. Lim Suk-jun, Political Science Professor at Busan's Dong-A University, told emboff that a position within the central

government is fleeing; only likely to last for two or three years at best. For someone who is still in the prime of their political career, such as Kim Hyung-oh, he is more likely to fight for his National Assembly seat in this round of elections. Kim is more likely to seek out a ministerial position in two years once President Lee has had time to stabilize his cabinet and his focus as president.

INTERNAL DISCORD

¶11. (U) Another lawmaker from Busan, Kim Jung-hoon, echoed this sentiment and said that he expected to see half of Busan's incumbents to lose their seats in April. But do not expect all of them to accept their fate quietly. According to Kim, there is a chance that some of the lawmakers who do not get the coveted approval from the GNP election committee will flee the party and run as an independent in their district, thereby splitting the votes and opening the door for other parties to do better than expected.

¶12. (U) There is also a factional divide within the GNP between loyalists to Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. The divide between the two groups first came into public view when the nomination committee announced on January 29 that it would strictly enforce the rule that any lawmaker who had been convicted on a crime would not be selected to run for a seat. One of Busan's incumbent legislators, Kim Moo-sung (Park Geun-hye faction), quickly protested and said that if he was not deemed eligible to run on the GNP ticket he would leave the party along with a host of other Park loyalists. NOTE: Representative Kim was convicted in 1996 for accepting bribes and would be considered ineligible under strict interpretation of the GNP's nomination rules. END NOTE. But to maintain some semblance of fairness, the Lee faction would also be expected to make cuts in its lawmakers if Park's faction is reduced. In Busan, this would mean that Lee-loyalist Kwon Chul-hyun would likely have to give up his seat if Kim Moo-sung is not able to run.

SAFE, FOR NOW

¶13. (U) According to Professor Lim, decisions about who among the Lee-faction will survive may come down to trust. In general, President-elect Lee does not trust politicians and therefore sees many of them as "expendable." Despite this general apathy toward politicians, a few key GNP lawmakers from Busan have penetrated the inner sanctum of Lee's camp and gained his trust and therefore are more secure than others. In addition to Deputy Transition Chairman Kim Hyun-oh, freshman lawmaker Park Heong-joon served as Lee's spokesperson during the election campaign. Although not in the Lee faction, Representative Suh Byung-soo is the head of the influential Youido Institute, a GNP think tank, and is likely to retain his seat in Busan as well.

COMMENT

¶14. (U) The worst case scenario in Busan and other GNP strongholds is that the factional fighting between Park Geun-hye loyalists and Lee Myung-bak loyalists will not subside in time to prevent members from bolting their camp to join forces with Lee Hoi-chang and his New Freedom Party, an offshoot of the GNP. Some sources indicate there may be as many as 20 lawmakers that could fall into this camp. GNP Leader Kang Jae-sup will need to exert creative leadership to bring the two factions together as he did following the presidential primaries. The GNP election committee needs to decide if it will enforce strict guidelines when choosing candidates or whether it will give in to the external pressure from the two factions and the party leader. Just as it came down to the wire in the presidential primaries, the GNP is likely to get its act together just in time to pull out yet another resounding victory on April 9.